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U.S. Knew in Advance of Mystery Blast

The United States had prior knowledge that South Africa and Israel would explode a small nuclear device in the fall of 1979, an investigation we have conducted over the last five years indicates.

An aging U.S. Vela satellite, built to monitor nuclear detonations, picked up the double-pulse flash of light characteristic of a nuclear blast on Sept. 22, 1979, beginning a controversy that still has not ended.

Two months later, in November 1979, a White House scientific panel, in a report that was not made public until the following year, maintained that the satellite sighting was not a nuclear explosion but some other occurrence, possibly a tiny piece of a meteor striking the satellite.

But the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency, which had good reason to know better, were certain the Vela had detected a nuclear blast.

For some reason, the CIA was circumspect about its foreknowledge of the test. In secret testimony to Congress the month after the event, CIA officials identified Israel as the party most likely responsible, with South Africa the runner-up.

In January 1980, the CIA gave Congress a little more information. A contingent of the South African navy was in the South Atlantic area near the place at the time of the explosion. Then in June 1980, a secret CIA report to the National Security Council said the explosion was probably a tactical two- or three-kiloton weapon detonated by Israel and South Africa (with Taiwan as a possible third partner).

But the CIA didn't share some of its secrets with Congress or with the White House panel investigating the blast. From land, sea and air surveillance by humans, submarines and satellites, U.S. intelligence established that Israel and South Africa were working together on a bomb as early as 1966. In fact, in August 1977 (tipped off initially by the Soviets, no less), the United States announced that the South Africans were about to test a nuclear device in the Kalahari Desert. Diplomatic and public outcry led to the cancellation of the test.

For the next two years, the CIA kept track of a steady stream of visits to South Africa by Israeli nuclear scientists, technicians and defense officials.

Two years later in Antarctica, a Navy official confided to Dale Van Atta that two U.S. spy planes had tried to approach the nuclear test area but were turned away by the South Africans and had to land secretly in Australia.

But the Navy source, who had tracked the planes as they passed near Antarctica, refused to go public with this vital nugget of information as Van Atta asked. The source was afraid of losing his job and of causing some unexplained impact on U.S. interests in Antarctica.

After-the-fact proof of a nuclear explosion was contained in a secret Naval Research Laboratory report on the incident: very high levels of radiation in the thyroid glands of sheep in Australia. Weather conditions would have carried nuclear debris over the area and deposited it on grass the sheep grazed on. The high radiation levels were detected the next month when the sheep were slaughtered.

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